

Why is the counselling agency Oden successful?

- a joint evaluation and research project by social workers and researchers

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Preface

The counselling agency Oden in Skellefteå is a part of the municipal social services with the aim to help people with substance abuse problems. Over a long period of years people who have used the services have appreciated the work. A lot of people have been helped with their problems and the treatment has been positively perceived. The efforts have apparently been successful – but how and why does Oden achieve so positive results? In May 2011 the staff at Oden contacted researchers at the Department of Social Work, Umeå University, and asked them to help answer that question. It was the beginning of a collaborative evaluation and research project between Oden and the researchers. The project lasted almost two years and the main results are presented in this paper.

Oden's work is solution focused, which means that the client's goals for his/her change is in focus and that the client's own efforts to achieve change is fundamental. In this reported project, several of the clients came to play an important role, as they permitted the researchers to analyse the social workers' documentation of the work in their cases. They also participated in interviews with the researchers. In some cases the researchers had the opportunity (with the client's specific consent) to sit "behind the mirror" and follow the conversation between client and social worker. We would like to thank these people for their great generosity that they have shown, and without which the project would not have been possible.

It is our hope that this paper will be of interest to social workers that work with similar social problems, but also for citizens who turn to agencies like Oden to get help with their life situation.

Skellefteå and Umeå in May 2013

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Prologue

Continuing education is an important part of a professional development, and the staff at the Oden reached a situation where there was a need to take a pause and reflect. Over the years the managers has given the staff possibilities to suggest and plan further education based on the agency's goal: to reach families with addiction problems, to reach families in an early stage with advice, support and treatment to achieve a change in these families.

When planning further education for 2011 it became clear that the staff had no need or desire to participate in yet another ordinary course. The need of the group was more about finding out what worked in direct meetings with clients. The staff was curious and eager to scrutinize and reflect on their own work. The planning stalled since the staff at Oden did not know how to conduct such a project.

But during a winter evening in northern Sweden, in the land of the forest-sami, there was a discussion at a bonfire. The discussion takes place between a social work student and one of the social workers at Oden. They talked among other things about: What is a good training course? How do you maintain professionalism through continuing education? How to keep curiosity alive?

When the student learns how further education is discussed at Oden, he remembers a course at Umeå University that he appreciated a lot. It was a course on Evaluation in Social Work, where the teachers among other things talked about the CAIMeR theory. The student and the social worker suddenly saw a link between the reflections the staff at Oden had, ideas about evaluation via documentation according to CAIMeR, and the search for a program theory. The conversation at the bonfire later led to a discussion at Oden, where the staff decided to see if they could get help to deepen and develop their work by contacting researchers at Umeå University.

The staff at Oden asked the manager of the personal social services and the department manager if an evaluation project together with researchers could count as further education for the staff? Could an evaluation project be a good way to further develop the skills of the staff? The managers accepted the idea and Björn Blom, Stefan Morén and Marek Perlinski were asked to collaborate with Oden. They accepted and the project begun in June 2011.



1. Introduction

This paper describes an evaluation and research project conducted between June 2011 and February 2013. It was carried out in collaboration between social workers at the counselling agency Oden, Skellefteå municipality and researchers at Umeå University, Department of Social work.

The aim of the project was to answer the overarching question: *Why is the counselling agency Oden successful?* The social workers at Oden had already before the project several assumptions regarding how and why the agency worked, but they wanted a deeper and more qualified insight into the factors of success. In the beginning of the project, the reasons for this desire to reach a greater insight were formulated as a number of intentions and objectives:

- Oden's *intentions* are to achieve professional development, better understanding, improved interventions and clearer "description of contents".
- Oden's *goals* are to obtain a locally produced program theory that explains why Oden is successful and that helps to further develop the agency.

Similar to the social workers, the researchers who participated in the project formulated their starting points in terms of intentions and goals:

- The researchers' *intentions* are to achieve professional development, to test and further develop the CAIMeR theory, as well as receive impulses and increased knowledge of social work, particularly concerning treatment for drug abuse.
- The researchers' *goals* are to develop a locally produced program theory that explains how Oden works, and that also helps to test and further develop general principles for how social work can be explained and evaluated.

The rest of the paper is structured such that it begins with a brief presentation of the *counselling agency Oden*, then the project's theoretical framework is outlined. This is subsequented by a description of the project process, on which follows a presentation of the results. Finally, a summary and the project's implications are discussed. At the end of the paper we discuss how well the project answered the overall question and the extent to which the intentions and objectives were obtained

2. The counselling agency Oden

The counselling agency Oden was established 1990, and is since then a part of the personal social services in Skellefteå municipality. The agency has six employees: four social workers, one psychologist and a behavioural therapist. The work is focused on adult men and women with alcohol, drug or gambling problems, as well as their families. Oden has more than 400 visitors each year. About 50 per cent of the visitors have substance abuse/dependence, and half of the visitors are relatives to alcohol and drug abusers. To visit Oden is free since it is a part of the public social service system.

There are normally two ways to get admission to Oden. Approximately 70 per cent of the visitors contact Oden themselves or by way of a family member. About 30 per cent get in contact with Oden through a referral from remittent, mostly social workers within the municipal social services. There are also external referrals coming from the criminal justice system, hospitals, psychiatric clinics or employers etc.

Treatment and counselling offered at Oden has a solution-focused foundation. A social worker often offers counselling to individuals, families or a network. Counselling can also be carried out by a team, consisting of two or more of Oden's social workers. When working in a team, the team is sitting behind a one-way mirror. Though with the client's permission. The team observes the session and may also make internal phone calls and ask the client questions, through the social worker, during the session. The team helps the social worker that talked to the client, to formulate feedback that the client receives after the session. The staff at Oden also works with group therapy, but to a lesser extent. For example groups for people convicted due to drunk driving and groups for addicted women and abusive men. At the moment Oden only works with kin groups.

Oden has since it was established made several efforts to measure treatment outcome. In recent years, Oden have used the Outcome Rating Scale (ORS) to measure whether the client gets closer to his/her own formulated targets and the Session Rating Scale (SRS) as a way to "take the temperature" of the working alliance (relationship) between the client and the social worker (cp. www.myoutcomes.com). Through the SRS clients have a possibility to express their opinion about their own treatment. For the staff at Oden the ORS is not only a way to measure outcome, the results are also discussed with the client during the sessions as a central part of the counselling.

3. CAIMeR – the project’s theoretical frame of reference

The project’s conceptual framework consisted of the CAIMeR theory, which is a social work theory, developed at the Department of Social Work, Umeå University. Here we only present a brief description of the main features of the theory. This theory is more fully described and discussed elsewhere (Blom & Morén, 2007, 2010, 2011b).

CAIMeR uses critical realism as meta-theoretical basis. This means that the theory assumes that what makes something happen in the world can be understood in terms of *generative mechanisms* (Archer, Bhaskar, Collier & Norrie, 1998; Bhaskar, 1978, 1989, 1993, 1998). These mechanisms are seldom directly observable, however that does not make them less real or effective. A basic assumption is that if social work is to be explained in a more profound way, then these mechanisms should be included in the explanation.

CAIMeR is an acronym that stands for a number of basic assumptions regarding how social work functions:

Under various Contextual conditions	(C)
different actors	(A)
make various interventions	(I)
that trigger or are triggered by different mechanisms	(Me)
generating short-term and long-term results	(R)

These concepts are organized and exemplified in a conceptual scheme that provides an overview of the theory’s structure and content (see figure below).

Main and sub concepts	Examples
1 CONTEXTS	
1.1 Societal and cultural context	
1.1.1 <i>Enabling factors</i>	Surrounding world, neighbourhood, other organizations. Enabling vs. disabling structures etc.
1.1.2 <i>Disabling factors</i>	
1.2 Clients life-world	
1.2.1 <i>Primary relations and life-world conditions</i>	Family, relatives, close friends etc. Even "troublemaking" relations. Health, housing, provision etc. Critical/meaningful events etc.
1.2.2 <i>Secondary relations and life-world condition</i>	Colleagues, neighbours, acquaintances, etc. Even "troublemaking" relations. Workplace, communications, recreational possibilities etc. Critical/meaningful events etc.
1.3 Intervention context	
1.3.1 <i>Direct intervention conditions</i>	Physical and social "environment" where direct intervention takes place, An agency's inner working organisation, Localising, interior, co-operation climate etc. Official and unofficial program theories.

1.3.2 <i>Indirect intervention conditions</i>	Local intervention conditions and they who sets them. "Outer"/ overarching organisation, organising, politicians, heads, objectives, resource allocation etc. Official and unofficial program theories.
1.4 Context mechanisms (social)	
1.4.1 <i>Macro level</i>	Market mechanisms etc.
1.4.2 <i>Mezzo level</i>	Organisational mechanisms etc.
1.4.3 <i>Micro level</i>	Group mechanisms etc.
2 ACTORS	
2.1 Primary intervention actors	Social worker, therapist, etc. Outlook on man, society and social work
2.2 Clients	Adults, youth, children. Basic outlook on man, society and social work
2.3 Other intervention actors	
2.3.1 <i>Formal other intervention actors</i>	Teacher, physician, police, priest etc. Basic outlook on man, society and social work
2.3.2 <i>Informal other intervention actors</i>	Somebody that intervenes, without having a formal intervention role, e.g. a neighbour. Basic outlook on man, society and social work
3 INTERVENTIONS	
3.1 Social workers' interventions	
3.1.1 <i>Formal interventions</i>	Methods, models, techniques, relational approaches. Introduction of ideas and resources etc.
3.1.2 <i>Informal interventions</i>	E.g. help, support, socializing as friends
3.2 Clients' interventions	Efforts, relational approaches, considerations, readiness, choice etc.
3.3 Others' interventions	
3.3.1 <i>Formal interventions</i>	Methods, models, techniques, relational approaches. Introduction of ideas and resources etc.
3.3.2 <i>Informal interventions</i>	Compassion, practical help, expectations, social control etc.
4 MECHANISMS	
4.1 Social intervention mechanisms	E.g. Response-, Challenge-, Role-transgressing-, Risk-taking mechanisms
4.2 Social psychological intervention mechanisms	Internalising the external and externalising the internal
4.3 Psychological intervention mechanisms	E.g. Altruism, "Social passion", Egoism, "Revengefulness", Identification
5 RESULTS	
5.1 Outputs	E.g. received material or emotional support
5.2 Outcomes (early, intermediate, long-term)	
5.2.1 <i>Surface aspects</i>	E.g. stopped abusing, satisfying economy

5.2.1.1 General	E.g. a new tattoo, different dressing style, other friends
5.2.1.2 Specific	
5.2.2 Process aspects	E.g. gradually increased responsibility for one's own change
5.2.3 Depth aspects	
5.2.3.1 General	E.g. changed self-image, emotional maturity, increased social competence
5.2.3.2 Specific	E.g. free from a certain type of anxiety, can feel joy over one's children, reevaluated importance of close relationships

Figure 1. Scheme of CAIMeR concepts – divisions and examples

The theoretical concepts in the scheme were the foundation for constructing a form for client documentation that social workers at Oden used during the project. However, the documentation form was not an identical reflection of the theory. The form was designed to capture the theoretical aspects in a more “casual” way (i.e. operationalization) to suit the social workers. The theory’s usefulness in the project and further development is discussed at the end of this paper.

4. Design and conduct of the project

The project used an elaborated multi-method design for data collection aiming at far-reaching triangulation of methods. The data analysis methods comprised both conventional qualitative content analysis and protocols for analysis of client documentation as well as interviews. These protocols focused on the core components (the concepts) in the CAIMeR theory.

A case study approach (e.g. Stake 1995) was used. This means that the counselling agency Oden with all the members of staff, including trainees and substitutes, together with a group of four selected clients primarily was studied as a whole, with its own internal dynamics.

The sample of the study

Altogether, the sample comprised of 14 persons:

- Six social workers at the agency. Four of them were actively working with the clients in the study.
- Three other persons more loosely connected to the agency, i.e. one substitute and two trainees.
- Four clients with different, but typical substance abuse problems.

Methods for data collection and analysis

Measured as different forms of data collection, the project began June 20th 2011 and ended February 8th 2013. Five main types of data collection methods were used:

- *Focus groups* with all the staff of Oden. (Not only those directly involved in work with the four studied clients). All such meetings were recorded and transcribed.
- *Special client documentation protocol* (computer based), to follow up Oden's work with 4 specific clients in depth. The protocol's structure followed the components of the CAIMeR theory, and it allowed the researchers to directly comment on social workers' notes from sessions with their clients. Such comments worked partly as a feedback to the social workers, partly as a point of departure for meetings with the social workers (see next point). Each researcher could comment on every single client's protocol.
- *Meetings with all social workers* to discuss the comments and feedback from the researchers. These meetings were also recorded.
- *Observation* (thru a one-way mirror) of social workers' sessions with clients.
- *Structured interviews* with three of the four clients involved in the project. (The last step in collection of data concerning individual clients.) The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed by means of content analysis. The results of the content analysis were finally structured following the same CAIMeR-principles (and protocol) as those used in the client documentation protocol.

5. Results – Oden’s Program Theory

The program theory is structured based on the headlines in the CAIMeR-model presented in Section 3 of this paper. CAIMeR is thus an acronym for **C**ontexts, **A**ctors, **I**nterventions, **M**echanisms and **R**esults. The complete program theory includes about 15 pages. Here is presented a highly abbreviated version with *illustrative excerpts* under the various headings.

Contexts

Social and cultural context

Oden has a good reputation in Skellefteå, both within the social services, in relation to other organizations and with regard to the general public. This good reputation probably contributes to the employees at Oden having big professional autonomy in their work (see also the Assistance Context below).

There is a local "working culture" in Skellefteå, which means not "burying oneself" in problems, just deal with them and move on. Probably, here is a link with Oden’s basic view that changing a life situation is something one *does* (see Interventions below).

The client’s life world

It is Oden’s basic view that what is most important in a change process *takes place outside the treatment room*. The important thing is to work together with the client in dealing with what is happening in her or his life world.

Assistance Context

There is a political culture in Skellefteå (which is a municipality with many industries) that you DO things, but there is not the same positive attitude towards formal education. It’s easy to get permission if you want to implement something tangible, but more difficult to gain acceptance for investments in such as academic training. There is an organizational culture in Skellefteå saying that employees have great freedom to try new ideas.

Context mechanisms (affecting Oden’s work)

Oden’s work is indirectly affected by *general economic conditions and the state of the labour market*: some of the clients are affected by difficulties in getting or keeping a job.

Oden’s work is influenced by the *interaction with other formal actors* within and outside social work. It partly depends on how other actors organize their work (e.g. specialized or integrated models).

Actors

Primary treatment actors

Some clients of Oden think that it is the team – rather than the individual social workers at Oden – which is the most important actor.

Clients

Most clients come to Oden because they are under pressure to do something about their situation. The requirement can come both from professionals and from family members.

The staff's impression is that the vast majority of the clients have been persuaded to go into treatment. Regardless of reasons for coming to Oden, the treatment is formally voluntary.

Other treatment actors

Formal

Social secretaries, probation staff, psychiatry staff or employers are often important formal actors.

Informal

Key actors for the clients are often their family, friends, employer, neighbour, etc. These are actors who the client often is anxious to retain in her or his life and that also is the reason for the client wanting to change the life situation.

Interventions

Social Worker Interventions

Methods and work modes

- Specific method assumptions/solution-focused
- Following the client's goal
- Treatment sessions/feedback
- ORS/SRS
- The role of the team
- General method assumptions

Specific method assumptions/solution-focused

Oden works with solution-focused brief therapy (Insoo Kim Berg / Steve de Shazer) and according to the "stool" method (Duncan & Miller, Feedback informed treatment, FIT, Scott D. Miller, Client directed Outcome informed treatment, CDOI, Barry Duncan, client and result oriented work, KOR, Norway). In a nutshell, Oden's interventions are aimed at *creating conditions* for the clients to *make* their own change.

Following the client's goal

It is a fundamental feature of Oden's interventions to *follow the client's goals*, i.e. what the clients want to achieve in terms of change in their lives. Already in the first session, the client's goal is explored, but the way to reach the goal is often revised during the process (e.g. the view of the role of alcohol in the client's life). The social worker's basic task is *to follow the client* in this process and to control and direct if needed – but still guided by the client's goal. This responsibility includes (at least) three elements, namely to identify the clients: a) *Objectives* (what they want to achieve), b) *Model* (the client's own logic for how to achieve it), and c) *Resources* (the opportunities and abilities of the individual client).

Session/feedback

It is a fundamental structure in Oden's interventions that they (usually) are arranged in *three phases that follow on each other: session, pause and feedback*. There is a difference in character between session and feedback. The session reminds of an interview, where the social worker tries to relate "un-knowing"; asking questions, listening and helping clients to express themselves. The talks should be completely open and the social worker will be in the client's world and how she or he thinks. The sessions are characterized by a high degree of *compliance* in relation to the client's story.

There is a template for the feed-back: a) confirm what the client says b) give praise, c) give thoughts that you think the client needs to get further ahead, and d) if needed give a task to the client. It is important about the feedback that it is clear that it is about the social workers' opinions – *you should not treat people without them knowing about it*.

ORS/SRS

Oden works with Outcome Rating Scale (ORS) and Session Rating Scale (SRS). ORS is a way to measure if it actually gets you closer to the client's goals and SRS is a way to take the temperature of the working relationship, if the clients like what you do.

ORS is an intervention in itself, a way of bringing in the client's everyday life/life world into the session room and a way to focus on what to talk about. The ORS means that the clients put into words what is important for them, thus giving the worker a glimpse into their life world.

Team role

As already mentioned above (under Development Context), the reliance on the *team* ensures that the social workers feel rather "free" during the sessions, as they know that the team (behind the one-way screen) keep an eye on them and also share responsibility. The task of the team is to note what happens in the session room, listen for what it is that works for the client and to look for exceptions and resources.

General method assumptions

Oden's interventions include partly *basic elements* equal for all (look for what works for the client, to follow what is important to the client, highlighting the client's life goals, create (together with the client) a concrete goal to aim for, and partly *individual elements* which may vary (the social worker tries different roles to suit the client's work, seeks for the role that can best assist the client to get closer to the goal). There are no specific methods that are suitable for specific problems.

What method works best (What works)?: Well, it is the client's own method/model that works best! The key then, is to find out what works for the individual client. Each client has its own logic and momentum, and the social worker's task is to create conditions for the clients to work from their own logic/model for change.

There is a pervasive feature that Oden's interventions involve an alternating between general and specific knowledge. Social workers at Oden know quite a lot about why people generally relapse into addiction (general knowledge), but they nevertheless also must know why the individual client relapses (specific knowledge).

Client interventions

The client's mandate (to the social workers) is given primarily indirectly by the client setting the goal, which is supposed to mean that the client wants to reach this goal by the help of Oden. The information on the context (life world) must come from the client, and how he thinks about it. *It is important for the client to ascribe any progress to her- or himself.*

Others interventions

Formal interventions

Oden's interventions are often conditioned by actions of other actors alongside, such as employment services, social insurance authorities, school and health care. Such actions may for example be about financial assistance, help with job or internship, special education and/or contact with a medical doctor.

Informal interventions

Oden's interventions are often conditioned by informal actions from e.g. friends and acquaintances. It can be about practical help (e.g. help to get to Oden) or friendly conversations (such as showing that the family difficulties that the client encounters also can be present in other families).

Mechanisms (assumptions regarding the effectiveness of interventions and other conditions important for the results to appear)

It is crucial that the social workers at Oden have common and integrated values, a common view on man and a common approach to the client. The interventions at Oden are not external (in terms of methods), but internal (in terms of an incorporated and integrated approach).

The clients' main contribution is (as mentioned above) to actually get to Oden and to expose themselves to all the questions from the social workers, and to do all that is needed (in the life world) between visits at Oden. It is important that clients try to do things a little different in their life world – exercise is crucial.

Some assumptions in general:

- That it is important to transform the "problem" to *desires for change* (What kind of change do you want achieve? How will you eventually notice in everyday life that the change has occurred?)
- That it is important for the client to hear him-/herself talk about their goals – and then experiencing: Oh, I know exactly what I want and I also know how to take the first small step to get there.
- That you cannot work professionally if you do not involve your private self – as a sounding board.

The social climate

The social climate at Oden affects partly the relationships between the staff, and partly the work with clients. There is a fundamental *Us-esteem* in the staff that is supportive, reflective and guiding and that helps the individual social worker to handle the situation, even in working with clients that have great difficulties in their lives.

Change Commitment and Assistance Commitment

In parallel with the assistance mechanisms are mechanisms that operate in the other direction, i.e. from the client to the social worker.

Clients sometimes from the start show a *change commitment* that can affect the social workers to act in a certain way. This means that the client's behaviour triggers social workers *assistance commitment*. Furthermore, social workers' efforts may activate other actors' assistance commitment. Oden's and other actors' assistance engagement may also enhance clients' change commitment.

Results

Outcome

In principle, outcomes is about that Oden "produces" (and the clients receive) different types of sessions with or without a team, as well as practical support in the form of contact with other agencies. Oden's interventions are often crucial to the clients, but are not always the only interventions and are sometimes insufficient without other actors' interventions.

The results are assessed in relation to the client's goals: the closer the client is to the goal, the better the outcome. Thus, it is the client's objectives and judgement, which is the ultimate basis for the assessment of results.

Effects

Surface aspect

The description of the target must be in behavioural terms in order to be possible to evaluate – “feeling good” is not a measure of performance. Result is primarily about changes in what you do, not just how a feeling changes (feeling and action are interrelated), and change (goal attainment) must be possible to evaluate so that the client can “see” their (emerging) results.

Process aspect

It is insufficient to rely on one’s own sense that the result is positive for the client. Via the use of ORS it is possible to see that the client has taken a step towards the desired goal.

Process aspects can for example be that a client (in contact with Oden) gradually has focused more on their own needs rather than those of others and succeeds by setting targets for how he/she wants the future to be. It can also be about the clients gradually taking more responsibility for their own change.

Depth aspect

Those clients that were low on the ORS in the beginning of the contact will have achieved reliable change in estimate, or if they were high from the start, that they have maintained their level. Result is all about finding a working way of living and a level that is acceptable to oneself.

Depth aspects are for example that a client has received a more positive outlook on his/her future opportunities, has a greater confidence and a strong belief in the ability to handle basic challenges and difficulties in their lives. It can also be about having learned to act in a more thoughtful way in stressful situations.

A CAIMeR configuration of Oden's program theory

In addition to the preceding presentation, where Oden's program theory is presented in text, we here present the program theory in form of a CAIMeR-configuration (cp. Blom & Morén, 2010). Hence it is possible to present the essence of the 5 ½ pages text in concentrated form.

CONTEXTS		
Societal and cultural context	Clients life-world	Intervention context
<p><i>Enabling factors</i> Oden has a good reputation in Skellefteå. Contributes to extensive autonomy and discretion.</p> <p><i>Disabling factors</i> The psychiatry and some relatives' opinion that life problems should be medicated.</p>	<p><i>Primary relations and life-world conditions</i> Oden's basic view is that the most fundamental parts of the change process takes place outside the treatment room.</p>	<p><i>Direct intervention conditions</i> Large freedom at work. Easy to gain support for new ideas from managers and politicians. A strong workplace culture based on professional commitment.</p>
ACTORS AND INTERVENTIONS	I N T E R V E N T I O N M E C H A N I S M S	RESULTS

Primary intervention actors	Social	Outputs
The individual social workers are important – but the team is similarly important	A strong team spirit in the staff group allows one to deal with difficulties, uncertainty, and sharing responsibility.	Oden "produces" therapeutic sessions with feedback (by the team), and practical support in the form of contact with other agencies.
Clients	Clients' change commitment tends to trigger social worker's assistance commitment.	Outcomes (early, intermediate, long-term)
Other intervention actors	Social psychological	<i>Surface aspects</i>
<p><i>Formal other intervention actors</i></p> <p>Often participates as a "commissioner" of change – sometimes becomes important as co-actors.</p>	Important for the client to hear himself speak about e.g. their goals.	Is primarily about changes of action – not only about changed feelings.
<p><i>Informal other intervention actors</i> Family, friends, employers, etc. are often important co-actors.</p>	Important to transform "problems" to the desire for change.	<p><i>Process aspects</i></p> <p>Not sufficient to trust the "feeling" that the results are good. Uses ORS to see that the client has taken steps toward his goal. Examples of the process aspect is that the client gradually takes more responsibility for his own change.</p>
Social workers' interventions		
<p><i>Formal interventions</i></p> <p>Focus on solutions. Following client toward his stated objectives. The separation of conversation and feedback are important elements.</p>		<p><i>Depth aspects</i></p> <p>It's about finding a way of living and a level that is good for oneself. Depth aspects e.g. concern that a client has received a more positive outlook on his future opportunities, greater self-confidence, and a strong belief in his ability to handle basic challenges and difficulties in life.</p>
<i>Informal interventions</i>		
Clients' interventions		
<p>Exposure to the questions posed on Oden.</p> <p>Overcoming resistance in themselves and in the environment.</p> <p>Trying to make changes in the life-world between visits at Oden.</p>		<p>General</p> <p>Results must be possible to evaluate so that the client "sees" his own (emerging) results.</p>
Others' interventions		
<i>Formal interventions</i>		

Figure 2. Oden's program theory in the form of a CAIMeR configuration

6. Reflections and implications

This final section of the paper re-connects to the project's starting-points by discussing the extent to which the project answered the overall question, and whether the project's intentions and objectives were achieved. We also reflect on some lessons learned and implications for the future.

The project's starting point

The overarching question was initially formulated like this: *Why is the counselling agency Oden successful?* Now that the project is completed, it is justified to consider the extent to which this question is answered. The answer is presented in the form of a program theory that provides information about the Contexts, Actors, Interventions, Mechanisms and Results (CAIMeR) that makes Oden to what it is. Although the program theory is extensive (about 15 pages)¹, the initial question is probably not answered to 100 per cent. It is reasonable to argue that we after the project knows a lot more about *how* and *why* Oden works, but we do not know everything.

The evaluation researcher Michael Scriven (1994) uses the metaphor "black, grey and white box" to discuss how much we know about the relationship between inputs and outputs when evaluating a program. (In this case we wanted to know how Oden's interventions generate results and how this is contingent of different contexts and actors). Following Scriven, we could argue that the knowledge of Oden in the beginning of the project was a "grey box" (i.e. there were some knowledge about how Oden works), and after the project there is a relatively "white box" (i.e., the program theory). If we take Scriven's metaphor somewhat further, we can also imagine that there are several shades of white. In other words, even if the answers provided through the program theory has made the box (Oden's way of working) fairly white, it is probably possible to make it even whiter. That is, there are probably still more important aspects to identify and describe regarding Oden's ability to achieve positive outcome. Nevertheless, the researchers' and the social workers' conclusion is that the program theory, probably embraces the greater part of what explains Oden's current mode of operation.

A question that still is possible to ask is whether the box needs to be whiter? Oden was already before the project a successful agency, but the staff wanted a deeper and more sophisticated understanding of how Oden works. Now that this more qualified understanding is reached, we conclude that the question is sufficiently answered. Yet it does not exclude that it in the future might be motivated to further study how Oden works. Internal or external conditions may alter that makes Oden change in a decisive way.

Which are the achievements? The project from Oden's perspective

Evaluating together with researchers and clients has been a journey of discovery filled with adventure. The first thing we realized was that what we did in the counselling room was something that the researchers – with an outside perspective – could not describe and explain without our assistance. We also discovered that our everyday work that comes natural for us, in many ways is much more complicated than we initially realized. It was through the researchers questions it became clear to us how complex the work

¹ In this paper we present a shortened version (\approx 5 pages) that focus on the main parts of Oden's program theory.

really is. Quite “simple” questions from the researchers led to a deeper dialogue about what we do and why we choose to do things in a particular way in a particular situation. For us, several concepts and assumptions seemed quite natural, something that we use in our everyday work. But in dialogue with the researchers we reached a more specific and detailed description and understanding. It also became clear to us that people working at Oden, sometimes have different ways of describing the same phenomenon, but that we basically have the same assumptions behind our descriptions.

Through the CAIMeR based documentation our work with clients has reached a completely different meaning. We can see that each working alliance with a client consists of several different mechanisms. This became obvious when we documented our work in the special form based on CAIMeR. It also became visible how many different aspects there are within a meeting between two people in the counselling room. Moreover, it becomes clearer that the client’s life world is crucial.

The importance of our teamwork has also been more understood. It is now even more apparent that several persons see and think better than one. We can view more clearly how the team can assist the client with further ideas, and that the team can help the social worker with the timing, i.e. to speed up or slow down the process when necessary.

A project like this resembles the process to find one’s own sense of self-confidence – and how do you do that? To describe what this project, essentially, has given us at Oden is almost as difficult as describing how to find your self-confidence. You know when you have better self-confidence, but you may not be able to describe exactly how you got it. It is quite clear that this project has given us a greater professional self-esteem and increased self-confidence. What we do is much more anchored in ourselves. We are also more confident that this is the way we want to work. We know that our work is rooted in us, not only as techniques and theories – but as a conviction! We have become more careful regarding our starting-points and assumptions. Instead of continue to just seek external knowledge, we have greater confidence in understanding what we do.

We have devoted time for professional reflection where there are opportunities for us to raise questions and get help from each other to get ahead. These questions have become more immediate. We are thinking more about how we are doing things and why we choose to do things in a particular way, in a particular situation in the meeting with the client. We care more about the elements in our way of working that we really believe in. For example to work closely (in an alliance) with the client, and to dare to be uncertain in order to follow the client in his/her process. We have achieved a greater confidence when it comes to work flexible rather than to work generalized and specific (according to pre-defined methods or principles). We have learned that our experiences, of working with outpatient clients, means that we know how to work, even though we cannot determine a specific method. We dare to continue to ask the question – what is it that works? and the answers may still surprise us. The continuous challenge for us is to keep curiosity alive, to continue to explore, develop and document our work, allowing our program theory develop.

The project from the researchers perspective

Similar to the staff at Oden, the research team initially formulated a number of intentions and concrete objectives regarding the project (cf. section 1). As we see it, these intentions and objectives are largely achieved. The project has led to professional development in that the researchers have got impulses from current social work practice. The researchers have gained a better understanding of social work within the municipal social services, above all concerning substance abuse problems. In addition, the project provided an opportunity to test and further develop our theoretical assumptions about evaluation of social work, i.e. the CAIMeR theory.

The CAIMeR theory (cf. section 3) was the project's conceptual foundation. Above all, it served as the basis for the form used to document processes in the cases that were studied during the project. The theory's concepts and structure have also provided the conceptual frameworks on which Oden's program theory is based. The appraisal is that the theory worked satisfactorily as a foundation for data collection, analysis and presentation of results.

During the project, we have observed the importance of a structured documentation to reduce the risk that key aspects of the social work are overlooked. The CAIMeR-structured form served as a checklist through which Oden's staff, after contacts with their clients, was helped to understand what information they should document. Since the documentation closely followed the CAIMeR theory, it was relatively straightforward to sort and categorize data according to the theory during the analysis.

However, we have also been able to identify drawbacks with such a structured documentation form. At times the documentation tended to be too instrumental. It was reflected in that the documentation seemed to be about filling specific areas in the form, rather than collecting information adequate to explain Oden's work. A solution to this was to create areas (boxes) in the form entitled "Other/reflections", to allow a freer documentation. Experiences from the project indicate that the form must provide a structure and a guide to what should be documented, to ensure that the adequate type of information is documented. In addition, the form must be flexible enough to allow a freer documentation that the social workers experience as appealing (cognitive and emotional). Consequently, a combination of structure and flexibility appear central to make the documentation feel adequate and feasible.

In addition to lessons concerning the documentation form's design, the project has helped to corroborate as well as further develop the CAIMeR theory. The work with Oden's specific program theory has strengthened several assumptions in the CAIMeR theory. For example, we have more evidence about how *social and cultural contexts* may affect the social workers direct client work. Another theoretical assumption that is strengthened is that the staff group's *sense of affinity* (and how it rubs off on the clients) often is a fundamental factor for success in social work.

We also regard the CAIMeR theory as further developed through the construction of Oden's specific program theory. For example, we identified a number of "new" generative mechanisms that are assumed to explain Oden's way of working. Two of these mechanisms are *change commitment* and *assistance commitment*, which seem to generate positive results at Oden.

Despite confirmations and further development, we do not assume that the CAIMeR theory is fully developed; assumptions in the theory may in the future prove to be wholly or partially incorrect. A deficiency that at this point is evident, is that the theory primarily concentrates on mechanisms that enable positive events. It would be valuable to focus more on disabling or problem creating mechanisms as a way to make the CAIMeR theory even more capable to explain social work.

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